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ABSTRACT

This booklet is intended primarily to assist persons who are planning and administering group care home programs for children. The fast growth of group homes has increased the variety of resources that are available for children. It may be questioned, however, whether placement skills have kept pace with the increase in placement choices. This material, in briefly overviewing the history, optimal size, program differences, coed populations, placement criteria, staffing and examples of group home care, indicates what some of the group home variables are and how they affect a child in care. (Author/RH)

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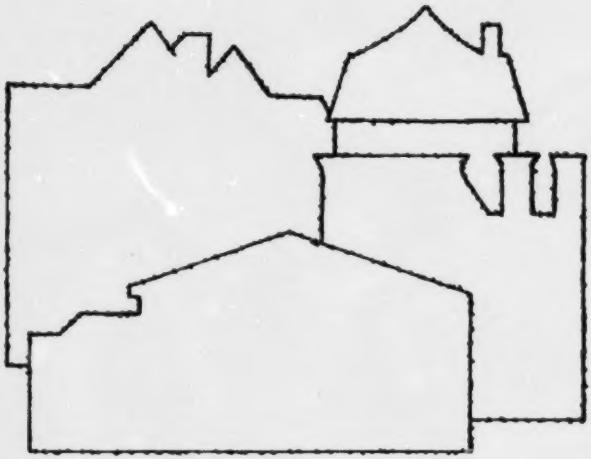

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FOREWORD

When a child is placed out of his/ her home, certain facts and feelings are the same, regardless of the kind of care he or she receives. The care can be in foster family homes, or in any of a large variety of types of child care institutions.

Even though the kinds of care may differ greatly, each is in fact part of a continium of out-of-home care resources for children. The common elements in all substitute care services are that the placement is intended to be temporary, (with some very rare exceptions) and that the universal goal is restoration of the child to its parents, and when this is not possible, to provide a permanent adoptive family for the child. It is important that we be clear on the commonalities, as well as the differences.

The fast growth of group homes has greatly enriched the world of child welfare, by increasing the variety of resources that are available. At the same time, this development also has complicated child welfare, by increasing the options from a few basic ones, to a great variety, often with fine shades of difference. These differences frequently may not be known to those who have the heavy responsibility of placing children.

This Children's Bureau publication is intended primarily to assist persons who are planning and administering group home programs. It touches on many of the factors that must be considered, and which can determine the difference between success or failure of group home programs. The publication is also intended to be helpful to child placement staff who have the awesome task of finding the right resource for a particular child. This material should be helpful in determining what some of the group home variables are, and how they affect a child in care.

Frank Ferro
Associate Chief,
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Historical Overview

The development of group homes for the care of children is rather recent in the history of professional child welfare services. Current child welfare concepts and practices have their roots in the early part of this century. The 1909 White House Conference set the stage for much of what has occurred since. In contrast, group homes were in their infancy only two decades ago, although the first known group home was established by the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in New York City for adolescent girls in 1916.

During the last decades however, group homes have become a major resource for temporary out-of-home care of children. There are many reasons for this development. One reason is changing social values, which often result in sharp pendulum swings within professional service areas. The indenture, and officially sanctioned giving away of children in the 19th century, coupled with the housing of problem children with adults in prisons and "asylums", was replaced by congregate orphanges in the late 1800's. When the implications of this "humane" care were realized, public sentiment swung away from institutional care, and the theme of the 1909 White House came into vogue: every child should be cared for in his own family or in the kind of family that his own should have been.

This historic development which in some respects resembles current emphasis upon "deinstitutionalization", while perhaps slow in developing, continued steadily to such an extreme that the general public, and the child welfare professionals again became disenchanted. Many children were simply too troubled, too needful, or too troublesome to be cared for in family settings. Realization of this, coupled with new concepts of human dynamics, spear-headed primarily by Sigmund Freud, again shifted the child care value system, by mid-century. Awareness of the limitations of family care, plus more careful attention to individual needs suggested that the profession should diagnose each case, and then select the most appropriate resource.

At the same time institutions began to specialize to some degree. Program types were planned more deliberately e.g. treatment facilities, correctional training schools, detention

homes, "residential care" facilities, plus an assortment of "children's homes" which often were little more than custodial care. Large size and quality tended to be viewed almost synonomously. Many institutions cared for well over 200 children, and judging from increasing capacities, it appeared that many small facilities also aspired to be large. The complexities caused by large capacities tended to be compounded by the fact that large institutions often cared for toddlers, and even infants, while at the same time caring for youngsters to the age of majority.

Concern about over-sized and over-used institutions led to reactions against institutions in the 1960's and 1970's, with various results. This led to efforts to make institutions more humane and more "home like"; some of these changes were substantial, while others were more cosmetic; most resulted in smaller living units. Many institutions simply were closed as outmoded. This emphasis upon reduction of institution population also cause both vulnerable and dangerous people to be moved abruptly into unprepared communities. The emphasis upon community living then tended to force the development of programs that would provide the best of both, small facilities, and locations in residential communities.

The fast rising costs of institutional care also contributed to exploration of alternatives, and group homes at first seemed to offer hope of lower costs.

Increased emphasis within the child welfare profession upon the importance of community involvement, peer relationships and maintenance of the children's ties with their families, all tended to point toward development of group homes. Further, many agencies, both placement agencies and child care institutions, wished to increase their placement options by diversifying. Both types of service began to develop group homes as satellites, or peninsulas, of existing services.

Probably no one now questions the value of this middle range resource, between foster family homes, and the more traditional large institutions. The variety of placement options is much greater. It may be questioned however whether placement skills have kept pace with the increase in placement choices.

Group Size

The number of children in group homes varies considerably, except for one nearly universal characteristic, which is a top number of twelve. While there is very consistent agreement on the part of group home operators regarding this limit, the reason may be known only intuitively. This phenomenon was explained by a group home director as a pattern of geometric increase of relationships. For example, if two people are together, and each relates to the other, there are two relationships. When a third person is added each person relates with the two others, resulting in a total of six operating relationships. When a fourth person is added, the relationships increase to twelve. This multiplier effect occurs with each additional person, causing the group dynamics to become equally more complex. There is strong agreement among group home operators that at the point of twelve, group dynamics are so complex that it is no longer possible for staff to penetrate them through relationships. While this may be true with all children, it is particularly true with teennagers, who interact rather intensely. The possibility of group or team relationships operating theraputically also is eliminated. Control may still be maintained, usually with negative devices such as regimentation and punishments. The use of child-staff, and peer relationships as a theraputic tool, however, may be eliminated in a group larger than twelve.

There need be no miminum number of children cared for in administered group homes; some have been operated successfully for three children.

There are various views about optimal size. Many operators believe that six to eight is a practical maximum because the use of the group itself as a theraputic tool begins to lose its effectiveness beyond that number. Regardless of the number selected, it is essential to understand that increasing the number is not a simple matter of adding children, expanding the use of resources, or lowering per diem costs. It is a change that effects every aspect of the program, which impacts upon the children.

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DIFFERENCES: Administered Group Homes and Foster Family Group Homes

Of all the variations that exist in group homes, one of the major distinguishing features is whether the program is a foster family group home, or an agency administered group home.

A foster family group home is essentially a large, or expanded private foster family home. It is licensed to care for a larger number of children based upon the interest and ability of the family to care for a larger number, and must meet additional licensing requirements, generally related to physical space, plus possible additional fire and sanitation requirements. In most states such homes are licensed specifically as foster family group homes. Administered group homes on the other hand are licensed as a part of the larger, parent agency, or as a separate unit of it. Either way their licensure is comparable to that of other residential care facilities.

Because there are many variations, it sometimes is difficult to distinguish between private family and administered group homes. The most distinguishing feature of private foster family group homes usually is that the home "parents" are not employees or staff of the agency, and are not paid a salary for providing child care. Features usually present in foster family group homes are: the foster parents own or rent the living quarters; are financially responsible for damage or wear to the property; are responsible for paying utilities; have control over the premises and who may be there; have control over which children are placed with them and can require their removal; and if the child care arrangement is terminated they are not required to leave.

Administered group homes on the other hand, are operated by paid staff who are under the administrative (line) control of the parent agency. The building, which could be identical to a foster family home, is owned or rented by the parent agency responsible for maintenance and upkeep. The administering agency may place particular children in the group home without the consent of the group home staff. The group home staff cannot require removal of children, and if the care is not satisfactory the administering agency may require removal of the group home staff, and replace them.

With both types it is essential that the agency make provision for routine substitute care, and for emergencies. Some agencies also provide for supplementary care, to assist the foster parent at certain times.

Both types of group homes are used for emergency shelter care, temporary care pending return home or other permanent family placement, for specialized service, or for older teenagers as a step toward independent living. Administered group homes also have been used successfully as "open" detention homes for pre-dispositional care of delinquent teenagers. Group homes are considered more appropriate for teenagers than for younger children.

CO-ED Populations

Even though most group homes are not co-ed, a co-ed population can be handled successfully. There is a need to avoid admission of children with severe problems involving acting out sexual behavior. With that exception, and with reasonable precautions in supervision, a co-ed population usually does not present problems involving sexual behavior. The children see each other in non-romantic circumstances so regularly that brother/sister relationships tend to develop. The teenagers often date other youngsters in the community, but not others in the same group home. At the same time, co-ed living helps youngsters to be comfortable in developing relationships with persons of the opposite sex, which also facilitates their own sexual identity.

Select Children To Fit The Service

Selection of children for group home care must be related to the characteristics of the child's needs, and the particular group home selected. It is essential that the reason for placement be based upon a need for group care, which is very different than a normal family atmosphere. When children are ready to form personal relationships with adult parent-figures, the children should return to their own families. If this is not possible, foster family homes should be the substitute care placement of choice. The placing agency also must consider the advisability of adoptive placements.

The unique contribution of group homes is that they can offer a consistent, fairly accepting environment, where children can live without being confronted with the need to form close relationships. The relative smallness of the living group makes it possible to form personal relationships with peers or adults, as the child feels a readiness for it. Family homes, with a more intimate atmosphere do not offer this option so readily.

This is not to suggest that group homes should not establish warmth, or certain home-like qualities. It is unrealistic however, to expect any group care to develop these qualities to the degree that is possible in regular foster family homes for up to four children. Generally, the smaller the group, the more conducive the atmosphere is to development of home-like qualities. Foster family group homes generally develop more home-like qualities than administered group homes, primarily because the residence is a private home.

Group homes do not have the potential for developing a concentration of special services, that large institutions have. When close supervision and/or control of children is needed, this also can more easily be provided in larger facilities. Many troubled youngsters need a period of concentrated care that larger institutions can provide before they are ready for the more open, community oriented program.

Common Elements of Both Types of Group Homes

One factor in the success of either type of group home is the degree to which they are concentrated in a community. Planning for group homes should include exploration of similar programs already existing in that community. One of the major advantages of group home care, in comparison with larger institution care, is opportunity for the children's involvement in community activities, and for community acceptance. This advantage however, can quickly be negated by saturation. This is due to community attitudes about large numbers of "outsiders" in the school system, administered group homes generally being exempted from paying property taxes, the greater amount of problem behavior that children in placement often exhibit in the community in comparison with "normal" children, plus the unease, or actual suspicion which

residents tend to have of "problem" children. This is a more critical issue with group homes than with larger institutions, where the facility can serve as a haven from a hostile community attitude. A group home provides very little of this insulation.

Any planning for group homes should include a certain amount of community preparation so that immediate neighbors and key people such as police, school administrators, social agency administrators, and zoning authorities are aware of plans. It is preferrable to have children from no more than one group home attend the same community school. Because group homes are small they usually exist in many different locations. This tends to increase the possibility of placing youngsters fairly near their homes, and consequently, to involve parents actively in planning and treatment.

In spite of the many variations in types and sizes of group homes, there are certain elements that contribute to successful operations. With foster family group homes, it is essential that foster parents have one agency representative as their "supervisor" or liaison. There is a need for rather frequent, at least weekly, face to face discussions. This person also must be available almost constantly by telephone, with considerable flexibility to come when needed. This person should be professionally trained. The focus of the relationship is administrative, or supervisory. Other agency caseworkers will visit children in the home who are on their caseloads, but the foster family group home parents need very open access to one person with whom they can discuss any issue that arises.

Administered group homes are administratively, and legally, a part of the larger organization. The fact that the home may be at a different location is incidental. The agency administrative chain of command runs directly to line staff in the home. These staff too, need one person within the parent agency to whom they can relate consistently, in addition to individual caseworkers who visit the facility to work with the children. At the same time, it is essential that the agency allow a certain amount of autonomy to the group home staff. While clarification of accountability is important, it also is essential that the person responsible internally has some administrative leeway.

Any institution, including administered group homes, cannot be administered by proxy, from a distance. Many practical, "umpire" decisions must be made on the spot. They can be made well only by someone on the scene. This person however, needs supervision or administrative direction from one person in the agency whom he can use as a sounding board. That person provides direction, support and consultation. This supervision must be reasonably available around the clock.

The supervision of the agency also must be rather non-critical as far as day to day activities are concerned. This does not mean that the agency should not have high expectations of staff. It does mean that staff should not be held highly accountable for individual negative behaviours on the part of children. If negative behaviours are automatically considered to be staff fault or weakness, staff tend to become defensive, and handle children in over-controlling, regimented ways, rather than allow the agency's method of treatment to take priority.

Even though the agency *may* order a child into an administered group home, this should rarely if ever be done, (except with emergency, short term care programs). Selection of children for admission should be a joint decision between group home and parent agency staff. Group home staff have a practical perspective the agency staff generally do not have. Also when persons genuinely participate in the decision making process, the resulting commitment is much greater.

STAFFING: Shifts or Live-In Couples?

The question of whether administered group homes should be staffed by couples, or by shift staff, may never be totally answered. For most group home operations, however, shift staff have been more successful. The intensity of the responsibility is easier to deal with if staff can get away regularly, and are not confronted with it 'round-the-clock. Agency administrators must be sensitive to both fatigue, and "dedication" in group home staff. Staff who appear highly dedicated, and constantly put job interests ahead of personal interest, may be operating on denial of their own feelings, or may be working out a neurotic need to increase self worthiness.

For this too, group home staff each need someone to whom they can ventilate their negative feelings about the job, as well as the satisfactions.

A Good Placement Means Understanding The Child and The Facility

While each type of child care has specific limitations, group homes provide a valuable range in the continuum of resources. They also provide a great deal of diversity within the category of group home programs. Each of these variations needs to be thought through, in terms of the impact that it has on children placed. With well managed referral, and intake procedures these shades of difference may not be wasted, or worse, be counter-productive. A high degree of professional and practical skill is needed in selecting group homes for children to match the need with the resource.

Group Home Examples

The Steele Home near Traverse City, Michigan has been used by the Michigan Department of Social Services for six delinquent girls for more than five years. it is one of a variety of placement resources for delinquent youngsters. The Department operates fifteen administered "half way houses" which care for twelve delinquent children each, a large number of foster family group homes, which have five or six foster children as well as regular foster family homes for up to four children. Foster family group homes are paid a special foster home rate, but it is much less than residential care, including administered group homes.

The Steele home, similar to other family group homes receives "supervisory" visits at least twice a week, and the agency worker always is on call. The Steeles had four children of their own, but only the youngest, a girl who was fifteen actually lived in the home when they began caring for children. Mr. Steele's brother and his wife, served as relief foster parents during their absences.

Because girls, all of whom have been adjudicated delinquent, come from most areas of the state, parent involvement varies greatly. Where possible, family involvement is encouraged, and

has been very helpful. Approximately a third of the girls in family group homes, return to their families after an average stay of about nine months, the remainder go to foster family care, or to independent living.

BOYS AND GIRLS HOMES OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY INC., in Bethesda, Maryland is a private multi-service agency which administers several types of group homes. It originated as a small group home agency, but currently administers eight group homes. Nearly all have different intake, purposes and programs. The agency also has foster home services, a "comprehensive family therapy program", and assists youngsters in independent living, when that is the plan of choice.

Agency practice is that all the group home directors and a designated agency administrator have at least weekly discussions. The administrators always are available by phone.

Four of the eight group homes serve to illustrate different uses of administered-group homes. All the homes are in residential or semi-residential areas and have no designation which would indicate that they are not ordinary family residences. All the facilities have different staffing patterns, each one designed to fit program needs.

KEMP MILL HOME is staffed by a houseparent couple, ("counselors") where the man has full-time employment elsewhere. Supplemental staff replace the houseparents who are away one evening a week, one weekend a month, and have 21 days of annual leave. Up to five boys age fourteen to seventeen are in care. Boys are admitted after a pre-placement visit; to date no boys have been unilaterally rejected at that stage of intake by the agency. Although the program is designed for semi-independent living, with the boys attending community schools, and working part-time where possible, their families also receive rather intensive counseling. Nearly all admissions are from within the county.

CAITHNESS is a thirty day shelter care facility for twelve boys and girls with one-night hold-over facilites for two additional children. Normal age range is from thirteen to seventeen, but may occasionally include Department of Social Services wards up to twenty-one. Referrals are made by courts through the Department of Juvenile Services and the

Department of Social Services. Youngsters include children in need of supervision, children in need of assistance and alleged delinquents who are determined not to need a closed facility.

Staff include the director and four full-time counselors. A school is operated in the facility by two teachers from the Montgomery County School system.

Children are accepted when the problems are considered sufficiently serious to necessitate temporary placement away from home. Once the admission is made, a fairly thorough diagnostic assessment is made to assist the court or the agency to make a placement decision, or to return the child home.

MUNCASTER is a unit of two adjacent group homes, one for six boys and one for six girls, age thirteen to eighteen. Children placed by the courts and Department of Social Services, include both children in need of supervision, and delinquents. The youngsters are referred after diagnosis. Nearly all referrals are accepted, within licensed capacity limits, because the two referral sources are very familiar with the program and are able to make appropriate referrals.

Intensive effort is made to return children to their own homes but this sometimes is not possible; approximately 60% return home, 30% go to foster family care, and 10% go to another administered group home.

Staff include the director, four full-time and two part-time "counselors" and two workers who are public school employees. The facilities also make extensive use of volunteers, student interns and professional consultants. Most family therapy is done by other community agencies, but is coordinated with the group home programs. The day program is co-ed.

ROCKVILLE BOYS HOME, in the spectrum of services by the agency, most nearly resembles independent living. Up to eight boys age sixteen to eighteen are in care, and include all the legal categories, children in need of assistance, in need of supervision and delinquents. Length of stay ranges from nine to fifteen months.

Staff include the director and three full-time "counselors" in addition to volunteers and teaching staff. The school is administered by two teachers; children from two group homes participate in the school.

Other than volunteers and teachers, there are no female staff; the boys do all maintenance, cooking, and laundry themselves. The program goal for each youngster initially is return home. Approximately 50% return home, 25% go to foster family homes, and 25% to independent living.

It seems clear that the major strength of the agency services, is the diversity of resources and the fact that nearly all placements are in a close proximity to the children's home communities and families.

With a small percentage of children, the family strengths are so limited or the relationship so negative, that it is necessary to permanently remove a child from the family. Neither the limits nor the strengths of the families could be brought into focus as clearly without active involvement with families.

Because of planned program variations this agency is able to utilize a variety of resources selectively based upon the children's needs, while also having access to their families.

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